

## Rural Revitalization, Southern Style



DAVID POWELL

**"W**e come from a town of no stoplight. We come from across the creek. We come from 'all dressed up and no place to go.'" This is how residents of the small southwest Georgia town of Colquitt used to refer to themselves. But no more.

Something has happened to this cotton and peanut growing center of 2000 people in the last few years. There's a hustle and a bustle, a sense of aliveness in the air. A gorgeous antebellum inn has shot up almost overnight from the ruins of an older hotel on the town square. People who fled Colquitt decades ago are returning with a new-found pride in their hometown. And everywhere you go you hear the question: "Have you seen Swamp Gravy?"

But wait; we're getting ahead of ourselves. Where did this all start?

On an April afternoon in 1978, a handful of Colquitt women attended a town meeting facilitated by the Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA). The spokesperson for the group, Joy Jinks, became fascinated with

the work of the ICA, attended the opening consultation of the ICA's Bananeiras Human Development Project in Brazil, then took her entire family to participate in a similar venture in Peru. Having previously begun a

nurses training school in the community, she now turned her creativity loose on her hometown based on the vision generated in the town meeting.

Believing that symbols are the key in community development, Joy participated in a town beautification project of painting store fronts and planting trees on the town

square. Next, she and three friends built a jelly business using the sour-sweet, cranberry-sized Mayhaw berry, the fruit that symbolizes the community. The publicity this generated put Colquitt on the map of Georgia and it became more widely known as "the Mayhaw capital of the world." Signs stating this are now posted on the main highways entering the town. In the past, Colquitt was considered too insignificant a town to print on most state maps.

Then, in 1991, Joy's intuitions led her to the magical potion for community revitalization. In that year, she met Chicago dramatist

*Continued on page 6*

**Don't  
Miss It!  
CAIRO '96**  
See details,  
page 9

### INSIDE

National Staff Retreat .....	2
Across These United States .....	3
The Art of Appreciative Inquiry .....	4
Indianapolis Community Finds Hope .....	5
Rural Revitalization, Southern Style .....	6-7
Cooking Up A Community Consensus .....	8
ICA Global Conference in Cairo.....	9
Profile: Victoria Adams .....	10
Resource Development .....	11



## Rural Revitalization, Southern Style ... continued from page 1

Richard Geer who introduced her to the concept of community performance. "Theater of the people, for the people, by the people" is how Richard summed it up. It's all based on storytelling, something southerners are famous for.

With a small grant from the Georgia Humanities Council, a team of interviewers set about recording local stories. Selections of these yarns, from comical tales of hound dogs and skunks to sad chronicles of abuse and violent death, were gathered into dramatic vignettes called *Swamp Gravy Sketches*. From there, a professional script writer synthesized the sketches into a common theme. Local resident, Karen Kimbrell, created the musical score and lyrics. Professional set and lighting designers added their touch. Owners of an abandoned cotton warehouse donated the building to house the performance. *Swamp Gravy* was in history. Its opening chorus tells it all:

"Oh, you've got a story, and I've got a story.  
We've all got a story to tell.  
Oh, you've got a story, and I've got a story.  
It's one we know so well.  
You tell me yours, and I'll tell you mine.  
And we'll put them all together and spice it all up,  
and we'll have a storytelling time."

Lauded by every major regional and theatrical publication, including two articles in the highly respected magazine, *Southern Living*, the cast of 80 amateur actors — housewives, children and shopkeepers — was awarded a place in the Cultural Olympiad of the 1996 Olympics and voted by the Georgia legislature in 1994 as the official state folk life play.

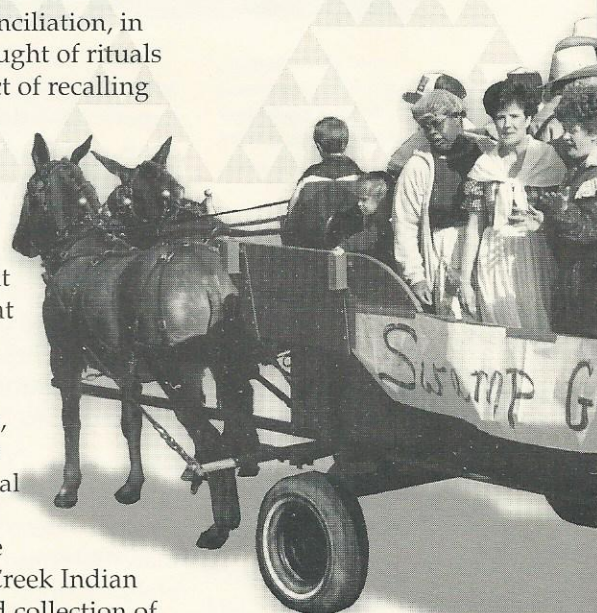
The bonding activity of this drama created a new kind of kinship that crosses all boundaries of race, class, gender and age, and has impacted the actors' daily lives. Heather Caldwell, a seven year-old, mentally challenged girl had a small speaking role in the performance. Her parents and teachers have commented how her attention span has increased. Veronica Haire, a 36 year-old woman, wouldn't sing or speak in public before her involvement with *Swamp Gravy*. Now she and her two sons are all acting in the play and growing together. Local schools report academic improvement of youth with roles in *Swamp Gravy*.

The impact of participating as a member of the audience is most graphically expressed in this excerpt from a letter sent by a woman from a nearby town:

"I was absolutely transfixed. I have never been so aware of our rich heritage nor have I ever felt more a part of our community. I grew up feeling almost ashamed of Colquitt. We always seemed to be an under-achieving lot. Things never seemed to be done with the same quality found in other towns. It's such a relief to see I was wrong. Nothing could have prepared me for the excellence I witnessed. My head was spinning with ideas and images. I could only think of it as an afterglow. My sleep that night was restless and filled with the characters I'd cried with and laughed with and with friends long dead whom we had remembered in the play. At 4:00 AM, I got out of bed and wrote a story about my mother's childhood that had always haunted me. Something inside me has changed. I'm not sure what it is. Maybe it's a pride in where I came from or the feeling of oneness with our community."

Most explanations of the impact of the *Swamp Gravy* experience agree it has to do with reconnecting people around their common roots. Nan Grow, an ICA facilitator of *Swamp Gravy*, sums it up in the language of ritual: "What is really going on with *Swamp Gravy* is a ritual of reconciliation, in contrast to the prevalent onslaught of rituals of suspicion. It is a liturgical act of recalling the journey of a people, of bonding them in a shared creation, and of anticipating a hopeful future. As such, each performance of *Swamp Gravy* replicates the dynamics present in the churches at times of great revival."

A veritable "culture industry" has sprouted in this little town, where 10% of the residents are now active members of the local arts council. A painter, a dramatist and a musician have recently moved into town. A Creek Indian museum with a highly reputed collection of Native American artifacts has relocated from Florida to Colquitt. A dancing school is on the drawing boards.



Continued on page 7



Continued from page 6

The economic impact of *Swamp Gravy* has been substantial. Actors have been able to get jobs denied them before gaining the self-confidence an acting role gave them. Ticket sales and grants have enabled new jobs to be created for administration of the program as part of the Colquitt-Miller (County) Arts Council. The Tarrer Inn, a million dollar bed-and-breakfast renovation project conceived as one of the ingredients of *Swamp Gravy*, has created over 20 new jobs. Local people have launched a capital campaign to raise \$500,000 to renovate Cotton Hall for performances during the summer Olympics. The local construction industry is booming and Colquitt merchants laud the positive effect on their businesses. The tourist industries in a tri-state area are also benefitting, as more people come to southwest Georgia to see the play and dine at the Tarrer Inn.

Ever since the state Governor, Zell Miller, led the applause at the Atlanta premier of *Swamp Gravy* in January 1995, the new prominence of Colquitt in political circles has led to state funding to build an alternative school and a youth apprenticeship program. Across the street from Cotton Hall, another old warehouse is being renovated to house these educational projects and serve as the center for the Swamp Gravy Institute, a rural leadership training academy to support the replication phase of *Swamp Gravy*.

The replication of *Swamp Gravy* has already begun. In the parks of Chicago, a similar, locally written play, *Scrap Metal*, has been produced. Even closer to home, *Swamp Gravy* has gone into a neighborhood called the "bottoms" of Colquitt. Gayle Grimsley, a lead actress in *Swamp Gravy*, for years has had a dream to help the at-risk children of this neighborhood. The motivity generated from her acting has given that dream the form of the Miller County New Vision Coalition. Supported by a \$15,000 grant in state Board of Mental Health drug prevention money, and the ICA as fiscal agent, her program "Bounce" has over 50 children now off the streets after school in tutoring, recreation activities and their own version of *Swamp Gravy* in the making.

PHOTO: TERRY TOOLE

## Symbol and Story Drive Economic Development by Bill Grow

Society is a complex, diverse and multifaceted reality but the same, basic dynamics appear in all societies. Drawing on the insights of thousands of people around the world, the ICA developed its model of society, called "The Social Process." Key elements of this model are:

- Three fundamental societal dynamics are foundational or sustaining, ordering and meaning-giving.
- These dynamics take economic, political and cultural forms.
- At any point and place in history, there is imbalance in the system, calling for rebalancing.

In our times, the economic dimension has taken on the role of "tyrant," the political has become its "ally," and the cultural or meaning-giving dimension, weakened. Efforts to foster economic development directly under such circumstances serve only to strengthen the tyrant and further ally the political process with it.

On the other hand, strengthening the cultural life of a community through programs that enhance local wisdom, style and symbol, restores balance by indirectly catalyzing healthier economic development and authentic political participation. The key is the power inherent in the symbolic function, which includes the motivating role of the arts described in this story.

We occasionally hear how a tragic death brings new life to a community. In this small rural southern town, it is a celebration of life that has catalyzed revitalization. As U.S. Highway 27 gets four-laned through our town, it looks like Colquitt, Georgia, may even get its own traffic light! ☸

A member of the ICA/EI staff since 1966, Bill Grow is an organizational transformation consultant living in South Georgia.

